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UNITA

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The Reagan administration likely will notify Congress this week of a decision to provide anti-communist Angolan rebels with \$15 million in covert military aid, according to congressional sources.

The administration request is expected to be made in closed hearings of the House and Senate intelligence committees, forestalling a full-scale congressional battle over U.S. aid to the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), the sources said.

"It appears that Ronald Reagan should be taken on his word that he prefers a covert program" of about \$15 million of military aid for UNITA to be administered by the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), said a source on the House subcommittee on Africa.

"My impression is that it's a given. The decision may already have been made," said a Senate source.

Reagan, who has made support for guerrillas fighting communist or leftist governments a cornerstone of his presidency, has said he favored a covert program.

The intelligence committees, which must be notified of any new administration covert aid plan, had no immediate comment.

The House subcommittee source said that Reagan could notify the committees as early as next week and just days before UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi is due to arrive in Washington at the end of January for 10 days of intensive lobbying for support.

If not, the stage would be set for a major battle in Congress over whether to aid UNITA and, if so, whether it should be military or non-lethal, overt or covert.

Jeremias Chitunda, UNITA's foreign affairs spokesman in Washington, told Reuters Savimbi would hold meetings with administration officials and congressional leaders and give speeches in several conservative forums.

"The main purpose of his visit is ... to reiterate the seriousness of the situation in Angola and to reinforce our need for U.S. support for our struggle," Chitunda said.

He declined to speculate on how much U.S. aid would be forthcoming but he said: "Even a very small material assistance would be enough to tip the scale in our favor."

Chitunda said UNITA needed anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons to escalate the bush war it had waged since 1975 against the Angolan army and an estimated 30,000 Cuban troops.

U.S. officials say the Soviet union has provided more than \$2 billion in military aid to the Marxist government in Luanda.

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A 1976 law suspending CIA aid to UNITA was repealed last year, paving the way for renewed U.S. support.

Sen. Richard Lugar, chairman of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has said aid for UNITA would be considered early in the new session, which begins on Tuesday, and a closed hearing had been scheduled for January 30.

Lugar, an Indiana Republican, has declined to specify what form of aid he favors, but he told reporters earlier this month: "I believe ... that the wiping out of Savimbi and his forces by Soviet-backed personnel would be a tragedy.

"But on the specifics of how that is to be dealt with ... will have to be the subject of considerable discussion both behind and in front of the cameras," he said.

Conservative think-tanks and lobbying groups are gearing up their campaign in support of UNITA, including demands for the resignation of Chester Crocker, the State Department's architect of U.S. policy in Southern Africa.

Crocker for five years has been trying to mediate a peaceful settlement to the area's regional conflict, including independence for South African-ruled Namibia (South West Africa) and a Cuban withdrawal from Angola.

But, in an apparent administration split, he is believed to be opposed to U.S. aid for UNITA, believing it would compromise America's position as an impartial peace broker.

A congressional source opposed to the U.S. support said aiding UNITA would be tantamount to "entering a military alliance with South Africa" and make a mockery of U.S. efforts to persuade the Pretoria government to dismantle its apartheid system of racial domination.

He said there was a chance Crocker could succeed in heading off UNITA aid if he returns from his latest trip to the region earlier this month with some firm progress in peace talks to report.